

Censorship in People's Republic of Poland in 1944-1989

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Abstract

The period covered by this study starts in 1945 and ends in 1989. Although People's Republic of Poland began in 1952, it is crucial to consider censorship in the context of whole period of communism and socialism with the starting point just after the Second World War, when Poland became independent. Independent, but still influenced by the power of the USSR. This article considers publishing culture in the context of censorship and propaganda in People's Republic of Poland in the long period of her existence. This paper demonstrates the issues which occurred at that time by looking at poetry of well-known authors and the historical context in which it was written. Great hope for the future after the war and the miserable reality of communism affected poets, novelists, journalists and average readers significantly. Yet there is always a way to trick the government and a censor.

Key Words

Censorship, People's Republic of Poland, Sue Curry Jansen, Pierre Bourdieu, Wisława Szymborska, Zbigniew Herbert, polish postwar literature

Polish publishing historian Tadeusz Drewnowski writes:

The Main Institution of Press Control and, soon afterwards, that of Control the Press and Publications in PRL [the People's Republic of Poland] imitating the Soviet Glavlit, was meant to totally dominate the production and social circulation of the written word. (Drewnowski, 1996, 12)

Censorship controlling the written word and literature has always been a part of controlling society and communication. In PRL these objectives were emphasised in periods of tensions, yet the manipulation, editorial changes and censoring prepollency had influenced Polish book history and publishing culture for nearly 50 years. Curry Jansen defines censorship as “a mechanism for gathering intelligence that the powerful can use to tighten control over people” (Curry Jansen, 1991, 13-14). However, it is debatable whether the ‘intelligentsia’ actually held the power in Poland, yet the control was highly embracing.

The Main Institution of Press and Publications Control (GUKKPiW) had been established on undefined legal foundations and held the power to question any publication, production of a film or play until 1989 when The Act of Control the Press and Publications was formed. Not only was censorship dominating literature and highbrow culture, but it also controlled the daily life of the Polish nation – it was at the helm of politics, ideology, religion and education. The censor was allowed and enforced by law to make any necessary changes in an author's text: erase sentences, paragraphs or chapters and replace them with new politically accepted ones. The authority of GUKKPiW was superior and an author could not prosecute the censor.

In 1977, Tomasz Strzyżewski escaped from Poland with the *Black Book of Polish Censorship*, which was “the Bible” for censors whilst editing publications. The information in the book covered meticulous instructions stating what type of data and to what extent certain details could be published; alongside propaganda information which was supposed to be spread. For example, it was against the law to describe the German Democratic Republic as Germany, and any information about the USA or historical events which put the USSR in a bad light were banned. Due to the way the USSR deceived people there were many debates and protests. Russia never revealed that during World War Two they killed forty thousand Polish officers in Katyń. Forty thousand Polish families were left without fathers, husbands, brothers and sons. This incident remained undisclosed until the decay of the USSR in the 1980s.

As a result of highly restricted censorship and the existence of the *Black book*, post-war education was limited. Studying Polish literature and Polish history was expurgated. Joseph Stalin and Vladimir Lenin had become national heroes; obliterating great personas of Polish literature and history. Through glorifying job security, the close bond with the USSR and the pejorative attitude towards the Western world, as well as hiding increased

alcoholism, bureaucracy and bribing, socialism was presented in a positive manner to Polish society: "Soviets simply replaced the fascist devil with the capitalist devil" (Curry Jansen, 1991, 89). Selective information broadcast through all means of media and educational systems meant to determine the level of knowledge fed to people which was supposed to ease control and regain power.

This argument brings us to the idea of Curry Jansen's "power-knowledge". The ideological demand and power of socialism was a necessity to rule and was maintained by "the lines drawn by the powerful restricting the powerless [...], they also inform and instruct them" (Curry Jansen, 1991, 7). In terms of literature, the power-knowledge tool had operated effectively at the beginning of PRL.

People's Republic of Poland's authors invoked the 19th century "realism" in their work, employing ideas of class, social change and Marxist ideology. In January 1941, during the Congress of Polish Writers Association in Szczecin, Stefan Żółkowski, editor of '*Kuźnica*', recorded the Congress' decisions concerning poets and novelists. One of the most important resolutions was to pay less attention to the war issues, especially presenting it so dreadfully. The focal point of the poetry was supposed to be on rebuilding the Motherland, glorifying the Party and its Leaders as well as listing for the masses new goals to achieve.

Wisława Szymborska, the Polish Nobel Prize winner, remembers this period as "the times when poets were meant to write this way" (Szymborska, 2002). She wrote *This Day* about Stalin's death which is an example of the poetry of "socrealism":

[...] As long as the first words remain unspoken,
Uncertainty brings hope, my comrades...
They keep silent, knowing they must read the words
From another's stooped head, from their shut lips.

[...] Here's the Party - the eyes of humankind,
Here's the Party - peoples' strength and conscience.
No part of his life shall ever be forgotten.
His Party will fight the darkness of his mind. (Szymborska, 1953)

The production of novels was determined in many ways as well. The plot was always supposed to be set in a factory or in a countryside where a certain problem arose and a heroic employee (coming from the lower class, from the masses) had to be "enlightened" by socialistic ideology and solve the problem.

“Socrealism” worked on a great scale as a “power-knowledge” tool and as a very successful one. In the event that Polish literature stopped evolving, many new authors would fail before they had been published, as Drewnowski writes:

[it] hindered the crystallisation of ideas and literary trends, prevented the creation of artistic groups and reviews, and made it difficult for Polish writers to maintain their relations with western culture, and especially with Polish emigration.

(Drewnowski, 1991, 12)

With Stalin's death “socrealism” started to break as well as restricted censorship, which resulted in a period described in Polish history as a “meltdown”. In fact, poetry, novels and the press were still controlled; yet the readership reached uncensored texts quicker than the censor's editorial changes. The literary language at this point started to evolve. The 20th century authors started to trick censors by deriving the knowledge from romantic poets and novelists who were challenged by horrific censorship during Poland's partitions in the 18th and 19th century. Romantic writers were forced to create their works through metaphors and analogies in order to express anything which was not permitted to be printed. Post-war writers began using words to manifest desolation and dissatisfaction with the reality of socialism. Poets created something unique. They wrote for the masses but in an exclusive and distinctive way. Outwardly, poems gave the impression of an average, down-to-earth world; yet it would have a different and deeper meaning which would not be so obvious but it would be easy for one to comprehend that meaning.

This raises the question whether Bourdieu's model of cultural production is valid in a communist society. According to Bourdieu, the cultural field of production is distinguished into two contradictory fields of economic (mass) value and the restricted field (Bourdieu, 2002, 77-99). Whilst the economic field is the production of literature aimed at the masses, which would be lowbrow culture, the restricted field of “pure art” is directed towards highbrow culture, which is supposed to be unique and more complicated (Bourdieu, 2002, 77-99); not to be enjoyed by the masses. In communism and socialism, looking at the development of the literary language, Bourdieu's theory fails. PRL's writers created unique structures in their writing, complex but easy to understand and to find deeper meaning by an average reader; meaning which is hidden under the labyrinth of metaphors and analogies which belongs to the restricted field.

In order to get a better understanding, it is necessary to review works of a few well-known authors whose “I's are often hidden behind masks, like Herbert's Mr Cogito (Herbert's lyrical persona) or Szymborska's array of fictional and historical characters” (Czerniawski, 1991, 10). Observations of the poetry of those particular authors (Herbert and Szymborska) indicate that they were addressing their poems to the public through a censor; to make the reader receive the state of things as they actually exist.

In 1974, Herbert wrote *What Mr Cogito thinks about Hell?* describing the reality of censorship:

Beelzebub loves art. He boasts that already his choruses, his poets, and his printers are nearly superior to those of heaven. He who has better art has better government – that's clear. Soon they will be able to measure their strength against one another at the Festival of the Worlds. [...] Beelzebub supports the arts. He provides his artists with calm, good board, and absolute isolation from hellish life. (Herbert, 1974)

The message is very clear in here. What is demonstrated in this quote is the beauty of diversion from the main political point to an illustration of the devil. In fact, the readership would still discover the meaning beyond the word-play. Though, if the poet had tried to spread the essence of the message in an article or an essay written as 'I', he would have been charged for crimes against the state and the country and would have been banned in Polish publishing industry.

A female writer, Ewa Lipska, born in post-war communism has got a more sceptical attitude towards poetry and language. Her work is extremely significant when studying censorship in the People's Republic of Poland. She followed the language tricks which Herbert, Szymborska or Różewicz used. She recalcitrated against the system, mocking the existing rules. Czerniawski says "by playing her phrase-breaking game she brings out a transcendental element which carries her meaning far beyond the immediate political allusions" (Czerniawski 1991, 11). His point can be illustrated by *From the Dreambook*: "If you dream about power/ watch your mouth/ for a week" (1978). The poem accentuates the phenomenon of consumption of language by the post-war generation. The written word became innovative and was evolving which is characteristic for Bourdieu's "restricted field". At the same time, authors led the readers through their works about the political reality; not aiming for economic values, but definitely trying to achieve the widest audience.

Moreover, Bourdieu considers the publisher's role to be that of a player, one of many agents in the creation of cultural field (Bourdieu, 2002, 77-99). In communism, publishers could not work as those agents because (a) they did not have any power in making decisions of what would be published or not, and (b) it was the censor's choice to determine if text was to be published at all.

In fact the publishing industry suffered the most. In the early post-war period, Stalin's 6-year plan covered publishing as book production was regarded as very profitable. All the issues concerning centrally planned economy affected manufacturing the most. On the one hand, book prices decreased significantly. On the other hand, officials decided which novels should be published; and publishers obliged to carry out the norm (to ac-

comply with the plan) did not trouble themselves about the costs of production, nor the profit.

In the 1950s, the publishing system changed as the lack of profit and big losses of many businesses became too noticeable. It was decided to cut the number of propaganda publications, replaced with encyclopedias, dictionaries and novels. Publishing houses which were centralized in Warsaw (95.5% in 1955) started to decentralize to other Polish cities: Kraków, Poznań, Katowice, Gdańsk and Łódź.

In the 1970s, decentralization of publishing was extended. The companies had a bit more power over decisions about what to publish; obviously everything had to be approved by censors after they received their paper rations (the result of centrally planned economy in socialism). In 1977, the first underground publishers started to print everything that was rejected by officials. *Zapis*, an underground magazine, of which Worecki was the editor, published many articles to criticise censorship. The magazine focused on stories of daily life and politics. It was concerned with the present; the upsetting reality, fear of the control and dissatisfaction of the direction the country was going. *Puls* emerged soon after *Zapis*, publishing poetry, short stories and novels of authors who were either banned by the censor, or some of his publications were not allowed to be printed.

The paper rations forced publishers to make decisions about texts in terms of attempting to predict possible changes from the censor. The editorial interference from the officials happened after the book, newspaper or magazine had been published. In that period printing costs were enormous, therefore publishers tried to avoid inconvenient subjects in publications. This trend affected a number of writers because they often auto-censored themselves before taking the text to publishers.

The publishing trends in PRL were a communist (and socialist later on) experiment. The officials excluded readers from the communication circuit, the reader was treated as a passive consumer of delivered information (literature). Moreover, the centralised economy enabled monopolistic literary trends which perturbed basic relationships in publishing industry between the customer and the product. The literary criticism and whole communication was controlled and planned by officials to rule the country. There was no relationship between author and publisher in terms of publishing, as the western world knew at that time, nor between readership and authorship. The PRL's censorship guarded book production at every level.

In 1989 People's Republic of Poland came to an end. However, the censorship issues lasted until 1990. Forty five years of control over the written word had seriously affected Polish society, Polish literature and Polish history. Nowadays, publishers undertake the challenge to bring back books and all the publications which were forbidden before. Though it is not an easy task, "especially in the case of literature deformed by

censorship interference and, sometimes, by the harassed authors themselves” (Drewnowski, 1996, 12).

The study has gone some way towards understanding the role of censorship in communist and socialist People's Republic of Poland and how it affected both book history and publishing culture in post-war Central Europe. A number of key issues have been addressed in this article: “the power-knowledge” aspect of censorship and propaganda, which was truly common and prevailing in Poland during long periods. The “power-knowledge” tool had extreme effects on people's knowledge and it did control every detail of their life, including their art and literature. It isolated Polish artists, poets, journalists and novelists, from western culture, literary trends and development.

What is more, this paper has also highlighted problems in Bourdieu's model because it cannot be applied to a communist system. Authors, despite the control of the written word created amazing literature using simple language and figures of speech, but at the same time, they were aiming to reach the masses as they wanted to spread their word. However, Bourdieu's theory is very influential and can be employed in many artistic fields throughout the centuries; it cannot be applied to the time of PRL. This Polish historical period was unpleasant and tricky to many; yet a great number of poets and novelists found clever ways to trick and mock censorship and propaganda as well as achieving large audiences for their work. Moreover, artificial relations between particular elements of the publishing chain (i.e. author – publisher) had interrupted in building the relationships between the reader and the author. Then publishers, reviewers and literary agents (Bourdieu, 2002, 80-82) did not work in terms of “the field of cultural production”. There are too many contradictions in the post-war literary industry in the PRL, therefore Bourdieu's theory does not work within a communist system.

Concluding this paper, I would like to quote Ewa Lipska once again as a summary concerning struggles of People's Republic of Poland's writers with the ludicrously controlling censorship:

A language failure has occurred nationwide.

Since the small hours language engineers
have been trying to hold back floods of words.

Drowned meanings have sunk to the bottom.

Words have got out of order. (Lipska, 1977)

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